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THE HISTORICAL CHARACTER OF THE NARRATIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS.

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I.

The great development of critical study of the Bible in our generation and the importance which has come to be attached to this kind of research, have had the natural result of making it appear as if criticism were an end in itself. A neat piece of literary analysis or the determination of the date of some imbedded fragment seems to many people a result of sufficient importance in itself to justify the labor of the student. This should not be the attitude of mind in which we approach higher criticism. Criticism is not an end but an instrument. When its work is all done we have simply prepared the way for more extended and more important investigation. Criticism is the tool with which we shape the material out of which the history of Israel, particularly its religious history, is built. To stop with the critical process is as absurd as to stop after one has hewed the building stones for a house.

The question of all questions for the biblical scholar is not, what is the composition or date of this or that particular writing, but how does the conclusion thus reached bear upon our conception of the historical development of Israel and of its religion? The religion of redemption is not, as has so often been represented, merely a belief in *past* facts, for it is in equal measure a present life and a hope which lays hold of things to come; still historical facts occupy an important position in it and it is, therefore, a matter of deep concern to the Christian consciousness to know just what the facts are which are objects of its faith. This can be decided only by a critical investigation of the

biblical records, and, accordingly, if the critic does not go on to show the bearing of his conclusions on our conception of sacred history he has failed to fulfil his duty to the church which waits for his guidance to determine the positive content of its historic faith.

It may be objected that criticism has not yet won such positive results as to be able to formulate the precise course of the religious history of Israel and that, therefore, the attempt to formulate it is unnecessary or even dangerous. It is true that final results have not yet been attained in all points; nevertheless, the forming of historical conclusions cannot wait until every minor point of criticism is cleared up to the satisfaction of all Christians. If that were demanded we should never have any conclusions and our criticism might as well not begin. We must go on from the facts as we now see them to draw inferences, always holding these liable to revision in the light of fuller knowledge; and conclusions thus formed, imperfect as they may be, are certainly worth more than those which rest on no critical basis whatever. Accordingly I wish in this article to discuss the influence which Old Testament criticism exerts upon our conception of the historical character of one portion of the Old Testament narrative, namely, that of the lives of the patriarchs in Genesis.

It may be asked why I do not investigate the historical character of the Pentateuch or Hexateuch as a whole, and make the historicity of the subdivision depend upon the degree of historicity which has been proved for the whole. The reason is that different portions of the Pentateuch stand upon different planes of historical certainty, must be tested by different processes, and, therefore, cannot be combined in a sweeping generalization in regard to the character of the book as a whole.

The story of the Pentateuch is divided most naturally into three main parts: the Primæval, which relates the creation of the world and the fortunes of the earliest race of men; the Patriarchal, which gives an account of the ancestors of the chosen people; and the Mosaic, which describes the beginning of the national life of Israel under the leadership of the great lawgiver.

The narratives of these three periods obviously do not stand upon the same footing of historical certainty. The narrative of Mosaic times is capable of a fuller testing both externally and internally than the narrative of Abraham. The documents from which the Mosaic history is drawn are more nearly contemporary with the events which they record than those which furnish the patriarchal history, and therefore have a stronger evidential value. It is as great a mistake scientifically and apologetically to put all parts of the Pentateuch into one category, and to make the credibility of the later portions depend upon the detailed accuracy of the earlier portions, as it is to make the character of the Bible as a whole depend upon our estimate of one of its books. As in every other record, the degree of accuracy and the degree of certainty must depend upon the amount of information which was at the disposal of the author, and if his sources of knowledge in respect to patriarchal times were less full and exact than those for the time of the Exodus, this fact must make itself felt in the history.

In regard to the first and third of these periods there is no room for any very wide difference of opinion among critics. Whatever one may think about the details of the narrative, he cannot doubt that in the record of Mosaic times he is on historical ground. It is equally unquestionable that the story of primæval times is not history but *revelation*. It cannot rest either on documentary evidence or on the memory of the race, but is a product of the creative spirit of the Hebrew religion.

When now we turn to the intermediate period, the Patriarchal, we find it no such easy matter to form a general estimate of the character of the record, and this is the reason why I have singled it out for special investigation. The Pentateuch varies all the way from the revelation of supra-historical facts to the record of historical events. To which of these categories does the narrative of patriarchal times belong, or does it belong to neither?

Clearly the record of this period cannot at once be put on the same level with that of Mosaic times, for even according to the traditional theory of the origin of the Pentateuch, it was written hundreds of years after the events which it records.

Between the latest incident of patriarchal times and the earliest date that has ever been assumed for the composition of the Book of Genesis, an interval of at least three hundred years must have elapsed. What are we to think of the historical character of a narrative which was not put in writing until after so many centuries? Can it be regarded as history at all, or must we treat it as purely legendary and destitute of any historical value? This difficulty has always been felt by believers in the inspiration of the Bible, and many theories have been devised to explain how the record could be written so long after the events and yet possess full trustworthiness as history.

One theory, which at various times has found favor in the Jewish and in the Christian churches and which has not died out entirely, is that the events of the Patriarchal period were supernaturally dictated to Moses by God, and that this fact guarantees their uniform historical credibility. This theory would solve the difficulty if it could be carried out, but unfortunately it is a purely *a priori* hypothesis framed to save the absolute accuracy of the documents, and it has no support either in analogy or in the records themselves. The mechanical and unchristian conception of inspiration which underlies it is contradicted by God's uniform use of natural means to attain his ends in the manifold spheres of life and thought. It is contrary to the analogy of the other biblical histories which refer us to documentary sources in support of their credibility, but never claim to communicate a supernatural revelation of the past. It is in conflict also with the contents of these early histories themselves. They are intensely human in their characteristics and their interests. They relate matters which have no religious but only a national or tribal significance. They dwell lovingly on incidents which are connected with hallowed spots in the land of Canaan, or which exhibit the character of some favorite tribal hero. They relate in the most naïve manner incidents in the lives of the forefathers which the Christian consciousness cannot but regard as repulsive. They appeal to snatches of ancient songs in proof of a statement or to the fact that some object, connected with the incident that they record, is preserved in a certain place. All this shows the per-

fectly human way in which the author went to work. Dictated revelation does not need to appeal to human evidence in support of its statements. As the work of devout men, who used the best means at their disposal, and whose work was chosen to be the vehicle of God's message to men, the primitive Hebrew narratives are incomparably beautiful and inspiring, but as dictations of the Holy Spirit they would give such an unworthy conception of God that if they made the claim for themselves we should have to reject them, as we do the Koran, as blasphemous impostures. Accordingly this theory is of no value in helping us to bridge the gap between patriarchal times and the time of the composition of Genesis.

Another theory, which found much favor among Jewish theologians and which is fully developed in the Book of Jubilees and in the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, is that Moses had at his disposal documents of the patriarchal period from which he composed the Book of Genesis. This theory also has here and there found favor among Christian theologians. According to it Adam kept a sort of chronicle, which was continued by the antediluvian saints in regular descent to Methusaleh. Methusaleh handed all these records over to Shem, who preserved them in the ark, and subsequently gave them to Abraham to be carried into the land of Canaan. From Abraham they were transmitted in the chosen family to Moses and were used by him in writing Genesis. This theory was so current at the beginning of the Christian era that a large number of pseudepigraphic works were then produced, bearing the names of nearly every one of the primitive worthies from Adam to Abraham. It evidently rests upon no historical or literary evidence, but is a piece of pure speculation, called forth by the question as to how Moses could write of persons who lived so long before his own time.

Several of the church fathers conjectured that Moses obtained his information from monuments which had come down from patriarchal times, in fact it was asserted that these monuments were still standing in the East. The origin of this notion is not difficult to trace. At a time when the art of reading the hieroglyphics of Babylonia and of Egypt was lost, and only the mem-

ory of their high antiquity remained, it was easy to suppose that they contained the most important historical information, and that Moses might have availed himself of their treasures. Modern research has confirmed the belief in the age of many of these monuments, but it has not confirmed their reputation for hidden wisdom. Valuable historical items are here and there to be gained from them, but there is nothing which would have been of use to Moses in composing Genesis. If peculiar ancient documents underlay the narrative of Genesis, we should expect to find stylistic indications of their presence, but such is not the fact. Documents do underlie Genesis, but they are the same documents which underlie all the rest of the Pentateuch, and not a trace of peculiar sources is to be discovered. The various modern forms of this theory which assume that Abraham brought a cuneiform library from Ur of the Chaldees, that Jacob had the Egyptian scribes prepare a full manuscript account of the sojourn in Canaan, or, as Professor Sayce suggests in a recent number of the *London Christian World*, that cuneiform libraries were deposited in Gaza or other Canaanitish cities which were not conquered by the Israelites, and that these furnished the documentary material for the author of Genesis, are all fancies which go to pieces on the fact that Genesis exhibits exactly the same style as the other books of the Pentateuch, and that all the stories of the Patriarchal age bear the stamp of the Hebrew national character so plainly, that we must assume that they have passed through the mint of national transmission.

The only hypothesis which remains is that the narratives of this period are based upon oral tradition. Oral tradition played an important part in Israel even in comparatively late times. In Ex. 12:26 f. it is said in reference to the passover, "And it shall come to pass when your children shall say unto you, what mean ye by this service? that ye shall say, it is the sacrifice of Jehovah's passover who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when he smote the Egyptian and delivered our houses" (cf. 13:8, 14; Josh. 4:6, 21; Deut. 4:9; 6:21). If after the art of writing was known, tradition still held its own as a means of preserving the memory of historical events, how much

more important must its function have been at a time when letters were not known, or at least were understood by only a limited portion of the community. There is nothing in the record of Genesis to indicate that the patriarchs knew how to write, and it is probable that all the history which they transmitted from one generation to another came by word of mouth. Among the Hebrews as among other ancient peoples, the beginning of history-writing must have taken place in the gathering up of national recollections.

With this conclusion the characteristics of the story of the Patriarchs are in full agreement. The anecdotes cluster about the striking events of the past and ignore minor incidents, as is natural if transmission depended upon memory only. The forefathers have assumed national rather than individual characteristics, as we should expect if the story of their lives were told and retold by successive generations. Incidents are connected with proverbs and national usages in a way which shows that they owe their preservation to the existence of the proverb or the usage.

Granted now that this is the case, how does it affect our conception of the historical character of the records of the patriarchs? Here opinions of critics differ widely. Some call attention to the marvelous feats of memory witnessed among the Arabs and other simple races, and claim that oral tradition is able to transmit an exact account of events for an indefinitely long period. Others claim that these feats of memory are witnessed only in connection with the committing of documents and that, without external aids, memory fails in a few generations. An extreme modern school, represented by Bernstein (*Ursprung u. Sagen von Abraham, Isaak u. Jacob*) and Goldzieher (*Die Juden in Mekka*, and *Der Mythos bei den Hebräern*) holds that there is not even a historical kernel in the narrative of the patriarchal period, but that the whole is pure myth; Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are ancient demi-gods or local tribal deities, and their deeds primitive Semitic nature-myths of sun and stars, heaven and earth, storm and rain.

Some ten or fifteen years ago this view found a good deal of

favor, but it is now out of repute among scholars. Its comparisons with the mythology of other races are too far-fetched, its treatment of the Pentateuchal sources too arbitrary, and its lack of appreciation for the naturalness of the story of Genesis so obvious that it has not commended itself to sober-minded critics even among the radicals. The view which is held by the majority of the school of Graf and by many critics of other schools is that the narrative of the Patriarchs is made up, not of myths but of sagas. Saga differs from myth in originating in facts rather than in poetic imagination. It is like it in having undergone a free transforming process in the hands of the race which possesses it. In its present form it is no more historical than myth, nevertheless a fact of some sort underlies it, and in certain cases we are able to conjecture what the fact was. On this theory the Patriarchs and their wives are not individuals, but rather eponyms. Their marriages are the fusion of two neighboring clans; their journeyings in Canaan and down to Egypt are reminiscences of early tribal wanderings. Incidents in their private lives are transformed memories of episodes of national history. Stade goes all lengths in this method of interpretation in his *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, and even Dillman denies that Isaac and Jacob were individuals, although he considers it probable that Abraham was a real person.

The main reasons for this opinion are as follows: First, the narrative of the Patriarchs contains, it is said, internal evidence of its unhistorical character in the supernatural elements with which it is filled. This argument is urged by many who do not deny the supernatural in the abstract, and who believe that miracles have really occurred in the history of the world, but who nevertheless find the miracles of the Pentateuch intrinsically improbable. According to these critics the supernatural element in the Pentateuch, and, in fact, in the whole Old Testament, declines regularly from earlier to later times, and this is an indication that it is the result of the growth of tradition rather than a memory of facts. The miraculous, it is said, occupies a much more conspicuous place in the Pentateuch than in the rest of the Old Testament, and within the Pentateuch itself the earlier peri-

ods are more supernatural than the later ones. God appears in bodily form to the patriarchs, and talks with them face to face. Angels are constant visitors of Abraham, and sit at the door of his tent and eat the repast which he has prepared for them. At the time of the Exodus these divine manifestations are no longer seen, but God speaks through Moses to his people. Signs and wonders, however, are found in the Mosaic period, and continue to the time of the conquest of the land. Then the miraculous gradually falls off and throughout the history down to the exile we find only scattered cases of alleged miracles. In post-exilic times the supernatural disappears entirely, and even the prophetic order gives place to the scribes. Thus a regular decline of the miraculous is found from the beginning to the end of the history, and the suspicion arises that this apparent decline in God's self-revelation is really due to the fact that the early times were idealized in national tradition, and that the further back one went the greater was the glory which was cast about the good old times. That the earliest periods seemed to have abounded in the miraculous more than the later ones, is due simply to the fact that in coming down through the centuries to the time when they were recorded, the oldest traditions gathered the greatest accumulation of saga and of myth, just as snowballs which have rolled the longest become the largest.

At first glance this explanation of the miraculous in the earlier records of the Old Testament seems plausible, but a closer examination shows it to be untenable. The assumed regular decline in the miraculous from the beginning to the end of the history does not really exist. The miraculous gathers about two great epochs in the history of the religion of Israel, the time of the Exodus, and the time of the rise of the prophetic order. In the patriarchal period the supernatural is really not at all prominent. The manifestations of God which are there recorded take the form of visions, of dreams, of theophanies, all of which belong to the *subjective* side of revelation. This form of the apprehension of God is not peculiar to the patriarchal narrative, but is found in all races and in every age. Instead of being a higher degree of the supernatural, it is the lowest degree of all,

for it is not the transcendental *within* us, but the transcendental *without* us which constitutes the truly miraculous. Miracles, in the sense of objective interruptions of the course of nature, are unknown in the patriarchal period. The theophanies to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob belong as really to the subjective side of the religious life as the theophanies to Isaiah or to Ezekiel, and cannot, therefore, be classified properly as miraculous. It is not until we come to the founding of the commonwealth that signs and wonders become a feature of the record. They continue until the establishment of Israel in the land of promise and then fall off, not by imperceptible degrees, as we should expect if this theory of the miraculous in the Old Testament were true, but with a suddenness which is quite inexplicable from a naturalistic standpoint. A long period elapses which is not marked by any signal divine interventions, and then they begin once more with the rise of the prophetic order and reach their climax in the works of Elijah and Elisha, from which time they again decline rapidly. This grouping of miracles cannot be an accident in the accumulation of myth and saga about a historical kernel, but must correspond to some fact in God's revelation of himself. Accordingly no valid argument against the historical character of the patriarchal narrative can be based upon its exaggerated supernatural character.

[*To be concluded.*]

[The Editors regret that the length of Professor Paton's article compels its abrupt division at this point, in the midst of the argument. The concluding portion will appear in the December number].